DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 358 738 FL 021 318

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TITLE Priorities in Foreign Language Education for the 1990s: A Report from the Southwest.
INSTITUTION Southwest Conference on Language Teaching.
PUB DATE 91
NOTE 20p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Tests/Evaluation Instruments (160)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Advocacy; Articulation (Education); *Curriculum Design; *Educational Needs; Educational Research; Education Work Relationship; Elementary Secondary Education; Graduation Requirements; Higher Education; Instructional Materials; Language Research; Language Teachers; Professional Associations; Program Design; *Regional Characteristics; Relevance (Education); *Second Language Programs; Surveys; *Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Education; *Teaching Methods; Testing; Travel

ABSTRACT

A survey of 368 second language teachers at the elementary school, middle school, high school, and college level in the southwest United States (Arizona, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Texas) investigated teachers' priorities for language instruction in the 1990s. Respondents ranked aspects of language instruction in priority order. Results were similar for all states. Averaging of rankings resulted in this rank order: (1) methods; (2) curricula; (3) materials; (4) advocacy; (5) teacher preparation; (6) travel opportunities; (7) testing; (8) articulation; (9) requirements; (10) research; (11) career applications; and (12) professional organizations. It is noted that the first three items correspond to areas of intensive interest and work in the teaching profession in recent years, yet remain highly ranked. It is also concluded that advocacy to the public of the value of language study is a primary concern of teachers. Subareas of each of the 12 priority areas were also ranked, revealing specific areas of teacher concern. The questionnaire used in the survey is included with the report. (MSE)

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Priorities in Foreign Language Education for the 1990s

A Report from the Southwest

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Southwest Conference on Language Teaching

1991

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PRIORITIES IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION FOR THE 1990'S

A Report from the Southwest

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INTRODUCTION

In 1988 the Board of the Southwest Conference on Language Teaching decided that a study of priorities in foreign language education for the 1990's as seen by practitioners in the field would comprise in part a sound basis for planning for the future. The author was charged with the task of conducting the study described herein. She designed the questionnaire that would be used to collect the information, and she enlisted the help of presidents of state organizations of foreign language educators and of SWCOLT Board members in distributing the instrument. During 1988 -1989 the document was distributed at state meetings, via state newsletters, and at selected teacher workshops. Ultimately 368 returns were collected from the states of Arizona, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico and Texas. The respondents were from a variety of teaching levels:

Elementary school	13%
Middle school	32%
High school	45%
College/ university	10%

This distribution is not unlike that of the general foreign language teacher population, although the number of middle school teachers may be slightly disproportionate.

The respondents also teach a variety of languages:

French	1/3
Spanish	1/3
German	1/6
Other	1/6

Here, too, the distribution is not unlike that of foreign language teachers in the region, although there are in general somewhat fewer French teachers and somewhat more Spanish teachers.

THE FINDINGS: RANKING ACROSS AREAS

The first task put to the respondents was to number in priority order twelve areas deemed to cover the realm of professional concerns. For purposes of calculating and comparing the results by hand, the author averaged the averaged reported by each state in order to determine the overall ranking for each item. The areas follow in rank order, the first in the list perceived as the most important. The average rankings for all states for each item were quite similar.

1. Methods
2. Curricula
3. Materials
4. Advocacy
5. Teacher preparation
6. Travel opportunities
7. Testing
8. Articulation
9. Requirements
10. Research
11. Career applications
12. Professional Organizations

This ranking is not the order used to present the areas in the questionnaire (see appendix).

These findings are of particular interest because the first three items, methods, curricula, and materials, have clearly already been the focus of intensive efforts for change in the profession for the past six or more years. Nevertheless, teachers clearly indicate by their rankings that they feel that there is yet much to be done in these areas. This results may be partly the result of the continuous turnover in the teaching profession and of the rapid increase in foreign language instruction in recent years, both of which factors serve to bring new personnel into the field every year, person-

nel who must be oriented to methods, curricula, and materials. The finding also appears to indicate, however, that teachers feel that the profession has not yet offered this orientation to all their colleagues and that completion of this task is still important and still needs to be done. These findings are equally true for these states that have had a large number of training projects already.

RANKINGS WITHIN AREAS: ADVOCACY

Within the separate area rankings as in the overall area rankings the averages for each state for each item are similar. Thus averaging the states'responses had little effect on the relative rankings. Within the advocacy area (rank 4) the items are ranked in the order in which they appear. Greater public awareness of the benefits of foreign language study is viewed as the area of overiding importance because if we achieved public awareness, we would by definition have reached certain segments within the public: administrators, advisors, counselors, parents, and students. Reaching them, individually, is also seen as important, however, and in the order listed.

It is crucial that administrators see language study as important so that they will support programs in their schools in a variety of ways. Counselors/advisors are viewed as key people in placing students in language programs. If they see no value in language study, they will discourage students from enrolling. Apparently, although only 25-30% of students enroll in languages, teachers feel that these other individuals need more convincing than do students themselves.

In the comments portion of this section teachers suggest three additional areas important to a "sales" campaign:

- adding elementary school programs,
- recognizing the value of foreign languages in business, and
- measuring language by proficiency, not seat-time in class.

A caution here, however, is that legislatures need to recognize the tightness of schedules and the shortage of teachers as they mandate change.

CURRICULA

Several items of interest emerged in the ranking of items in this section. First of all, the fact that the first item in importance is adding more elementary school foreign language programs is somewhat surprising. While the need for such an addition is often discussed, one might not have expected such unanimity from foreign language educators at all levels. Some respondents expressed concern that implementing such an addition would create hardships in a discipline that is already experiencing teacher shortages and which has a very small trained cadre of teachers for the level in question. Nevertheless, the vote is clear. Curriculum is the area ranked second in importance, and the area within it ranked first is adding elementary school programs.

Also of interest is the fact that the second-ranked item in the section is the greater clarification and dissemination of proficiency-oriented curricula at all levels in all languages. Once again, the endeavor mentioned is one that has received much attention and effort over the past few years. Therefore one might have assumed that such dissemination would no longer be considered urgent need. Clearly, however, the respondents perceive the further dissemination and development of proficiency-oriented curricula as a continuing and important.

Items 3 through 5 a:
- refinement of proficiency-oriented curricula,
- use of proficiency standards rather than credit hours earned and
- infusion of proficiency maintenance into upper level language courses.

Item 3 (refinement) is, along with Item 2 (development/dissemination), still a fundamental curriculum issue. Issues of proficiency maintenance and

proficiency standards could be considered key support mechanisms for curriculum once it is in place.

Exploration of post-proficiency era directions ranks sixth out of nine, not a high ranking. Respondents apparently think we still have much to do to implement current ideas before we look much beyond them. As will be repeated in several other sections, there is no mandate to move to another organizing concept.

Items 7 - 9 are
- a better accomodation of gifted and handicapped students,
- programs for the less-commonly languages, and
- more special purposes language courses.

Respondent comments reveal much interest in these areas. Special purposes courses interpreted as language through content instruction are recommended. They are also praised when teamed with occupational training in high school and community colleges. Respondents think that present language teachers (Spanish, French, and German) fear for their own job survival in the face of increasing government emphasis on "rarer" languages. They recommend programs to assist them to add a third "rare" language to their own teaching repertoire. They also note a need to confine such instruction to high school and above and to recognize that students will progress more slowly in languages that are more different from English.

Respondents also express in interest in seeing curricula expand in more schools to integrate global education. The spread of International Baccalaureate programs is advocated. The integration of more comparative cultures instruction is also recommended as a vehicle for having more global curricula.

Teachers mention issues of curriculum articulation here, a major issue considered separately in another section. Teachers also note that they need to be involved more in curriculum planning and development. Finally,

they cite the middle school as a level in special need of foreign language curriculum development.

Overall, the results in this section suggest that the profession and the government are not in harmony on priorities. Funding is ending for proficiency program implementation, and governmental support appears to be growing for the less commonly taught languages. Much communication will be necessary to bring the two groups together.

METHODS

Quite in keeping with a current research interest in foreign languages today, respondents, who generally were not aware of the research (at the Defense Language Institute, for example), rank diversification of teaching styles for diverse learning styles number one in this area (1). They are interested in knowing which methods work best with which types of students, one of the precise thrusts of the research. They comment that there are still students we don't reach effectively.

The number two area is more training in proficiency-oriented language teaching for secondary teachers, a finding of particular interest because that kind of training has been the focus of considerable effort and funding for the past five years. The respondents evidently feel that there are still many teachers who have not yet had such training and thus they rank providing that opportunity very high. They comment that there is a related great need for more university trainers who have a proficiency orientation. The item "more training in proficiency-oriented language teaching for college and university instructors" ranked fourth, however, coming after "more proficiency-oriented language teaching". Exploration of post-proficiency era teaching approaches ranked last here, a concept apprently of no particular interest. Teachers are not yet ready to leave the profficiency era.

Comments and suggestions on methods comprised exploration of adaptations for elementary and middle schools, a finding consistent with other emphases on elementary programs. Respondents also suggested training in effective methods of incorporating technology and language through content as an approach.

MATERIALS

The top-ranked materials need is more proficiency-oriented materials for high school. Many respondents indicate dissatisfaction with the newest lines of publications for that level, and therefore, they still view new material as a high priority. The new materials are not new enough. Second-ranked is proficiency material for elementary school followed by more video materials again showing the interest in elementary school programs. College level materials are number four. Post-proficiency, computer, special-purpose and less-commonly-taught-language materials hold the lowest positions, again emphasizing the difference in teacher concerns and government concerns.

The comments for this section are especially valuable and enlightening. Teachers suggest:

- culture materials
- proficiency-oriented materials for third year (high school and college)
- proficiency-oriented materials for middle-school and exploratory programs
- culture-authentic materials
- more proficiency-oriented teacher training materials
- greater articulation of materials across more levels
- more outcome-based tests

All these suggestions do indeed touch sparse areas in the market and indicate a continued interest on the part of teachers in a full range of updated materials.

REQUIREMENTS AND PROGRAM STRUCTURES

The respondents' number one priority in this nineth-ranked category is more high-school requirements in foreign languages, followed by more

elementary-school requirements and more college requirements. Despite expressed concerns about teacher shortages and overcrowded classes that could become even larger with more requirements, respondents favored increased requirements at all levels; but they suggested smaller classes, more variety of offerings, more flexible scheduling, and validation of proficiency rather than collection of credits. They suggest more FLEX programs and magnet schools for lower-level programs, an idea consistent with emphasis in other sections on establishing elementary school programs.

More detailed aspects of structuring a program ranked lower in importance. Better placement procedures, more college exit requirements, better credit-by-examination procedures, and more contact hours per class rank 4-7. The more basic category of putting the requirements in place evidently would need attention first.

TESTING

The priority in testing (ranked 7) is more training for teachers in the preparation of proficiency-oriented classroom tests, a mandate for teacher preparation. This item is followed by "more use of such tests in the classroom" and by "more speaking tests in the classroom". Teachers have again focused on the most basic area and have indicated that the task has not yet been accomplished. They comment that tests are not yet proficiency-based and that speaking is still often not included.

Items four and five focus on standardized tests. Respondents call specifically for more speaking and writing on language tests and for more proficiency-oriented standardized tests in general. While some test makers are involved in such charges already, they should at least find these findings reassuring. They are beginning to move in directions that teachers support.

After problems in the two critical areas above have been resolved, respondents' would turn their attention to the items ranked 6-9:

- proficiency test results used for advancement rather than credits,
- new language placement tests,
- new language achievement tests and
- new tests for credit by examination.

ARTICULATION AND INTEGRATION

Respondents say that creation of a multi-year public school foreign language sequence is of primary importance, a curriculum that should integrate global education and the arts with language study. While these are at present concerns internal to each school and district, they see this development as linking them with colleges in the future as there come to be more formal opportunities for public and private school language educators to interact regarding articulation. Their suggested ideas in this category (8) are:

- expansion of Academic Alliances,
- area studies,
- sister schools,
- sister cities
- state supervisor and college chair meetings,
- teacher/professor class exchanges, and
- student exchanges across districts.

All their ideas, if implemented, could indeed facilitate far more effective articulation and dialog.

RESEARCH

Research ranks tenth among the categories. Research on the most effective methods or approaches to second language acquisition is top-ranked, followed by research on effective evaluation measures of second language acquisition. Studies of effective programs and materials rank third and fourth, leaving the slightly more esoteric areas of aptitude, stages of acquisition, and optimum age in less-valued positions.

Respondents are apparently very practically oriented in their research interests. The studies that interest most are those that bear most directly on the classroom. Teachers also suggested more research on interactive computers and on teaching the learning disabled. Researchers also apparently need to do more to make applications and implications of their research more obvious and more available to practitioners.

TEACHER PREPARATION AND CERTIFICATION

The most important theme in the fifth-ranked category is greater language proficiency, followed by actual target culture experiences, which respondents recommend be required. The emphasis is still on the basics, and teachers still feel that not all candidates for teaching in language are well-prepared in these two skills/areas. Greater methodological expertise was number three, with a number of respondents pointing out that general methods (as required in many institutions) are not appropriately helpful, that language methods are needed.

More language and culture studies are in fourth place, followed by more stringent certification requirements. More literature studies ranks last, even though many college language certification programs are still heavy in this area.

Suggestions and explanations include that

- teaching level be determined by proficiency, experience and interest,
- there be more requirements to keep up-to-date and to keep up one's proficiency level after initial certification,
- there be a technology requirement, and
- teachers be prepared to teach language, as well as not usage.

In this significant area, too, apparently, the most basic needs have not yet been met.

FOREIGN TRAVEL/STUDY

In this sixth-ranked area, teachers'wishes were consistent with those expressed in the previous section: the number one need is for more

financial assistance for foreign experience for teachers. In descending order they emphasize more programs, more financial assistance for students, and more required programs for teachers. Thus, logically, three of the top four priorities feature teachers and their foreign study needs. Providing more programs and requirements at high-school and college level follow but taking care of the needs of the teachers themselves remains a strong area.

Teachers recommend travel programs for potential teachers as well and request programs for potential teachers and less expensive programs abroad. They also suggest the creation of guidelines for more experiences abroad.

PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

These important groups rank next to last, with the recommendation that the following thrusts be established or continued:

- more emphasis on methods,
- more emphasis on target-language development,
- emphasis on foreign opportunities and
- more emphasis on materials.

Last-ranked are "fewer organizations" and "change of mission from theoretical to more practical", although many respondents indicated in their comments that organizations needed to cooperate more and overlap and compete less.

Teachers suggested more hands-on activities at conferences, more sessions on technology, and networking opportunities. In general the ideas are heavily practical.

Many organizations already provide numerous sessions on methods at their conferences, but few are yet providing many opportunities for target language development. Likewise few groups are involved in sponsoring foreign study programs for teachers. Both these areas constitute a major mandate from the constituency to the professional organization. Finally many teachers wanted organizations to lobby administrators and legislators so they would be given time to go to professional meetings.

CAREER APPLICATIONS

In the last-ranked area respondents want better communication as the top priority. Teachers see this kind of advocacy as an important mission for the organizations. Second and third are awareness programs for students and more internships. The latter in particular are not widely available but would indeed prove valuable. Awareness programs for teachers rank last, apparently because the respondents see themselves as already strong in this category. Again the focus is very practical.

SUMMARY/CONCLUSIONS

Much has been done in recent years to bring proficiency-oriented methods, curricula, and materials to all language programs, but the mandate is clearly to continue. There are many colleagues out there who have not yet been reached. For potential teachers and for themselves, teachers already in the field want more target language experiences, more target culture experience (with financial support), and access to continued orientation to proficiency-based methods, curricula, tests and materials.

Advocacy to the public of the value of language study is primary. Also primary is the adding of elementary school foreign language programs, in many cases in the form of magnet schools and FLEX (foreign language experience) programs. Concurrently we are to increase foreign language requirements at all levels of education, all the while assuring an adequate teacher supply and reasonable class size.

We want to link our programs to business, and we want our professional organizations to help us do that. We also want them to sponsor target culture experiences and to provide opportunities at conferences for target language development. We also look to our organizations help facilitate contact across levels and the more effective articulation across programs.

Teachers want the validation of proficiency and not the collection of credit hours to drive advancement through language study. They want standardized and classroom tests to be proficiency-oriented and to include speaking and writing. They want training in the preparation of such tests for their own classrooms.

Teachers want applied research, studies of effective classroom practica in methods and testing. They evince little interest in research overall. Obviously more needs to be done to share the implications and applications of research in language acquisition to the classroom. Teachers' high interest in methods and in diverse learning styles suggest a clear link to that current body of research if it only be made accessible.

In curriculum and materials teachers favor global education and culture-based studies that incorporate

culture-authentic materials. Teachers see language through the content areas as one approach to this sort of integration. They see video as a way to facilitate such studies. Respondents see themselves as out of step with government priorities, feeling that much is yet to be done to develop and support existing language programs prior to initiating extensive numbers of programs for special purposes and in the less-commonly taught languages. They do express an interest, however, in adding a rare language to their personal teaching repertoire. The themes of the profession in recent years have been supported by many teachers. They simply find that resources have been inadequate to implement or integrate many of these ideas into exisiting programs.

"The Post-proficiency era" as a concept has no currency as yet to the respondents in this study. The proficiency orientation is not seen as a fad but rather as the current and best-developed phase in a long-term revolution in language teaching. It is a revolution in which they see themselves continuing to take part. They see much of value that has been accomplished and much of significance that remains to be done. With or without resources, they intend to continue to try to do that work. These then, are our priorities and our guide for the coming decade and the new century.

Priorities in Foreign Languages for the 1990's

Instructions: (1) Please rank the items within each of the eleven sections by their importance as you perceive it, using 1 for the most important, 2 for the next most important item, etc. (2) Please perform the same operation on the twelve topic categories themselves.

___ I. Advocacy

___ 1. greater public awareness of the benefits of foreign language study.
___ 2. greater administrator, counselor, advisor awareness of the benefits of foreign language study.
___ 3. greater parental awareness of the benefits of foreign language study.
___ 4. greater student awareness of the benefits of foreign language study.
___ 5. broader and more frequent recognition of foreign language advocates.
___ 6. other _____
_____

___ II. Curricula

___ 1. Greater clarification/development/dissemination of proficiency-oriented curricula at all levels in all languages to every interested institution
___ 2. Exploration of post-proficiency-era curriculum directions.
___ 3. Refinement of proficiency-oriented curricula.
___ 4. Infusion of proficiency maintenance into upper level language courses, including literature
___ 5. Use of proficiency standards rather than credit hours for progression through curriculum.
___ 6. Better accomodation of gifted and handicapped students.
___ 7. More special purposes languages courses.
___ 8. More programs in the less-commonly taught languages.
___ 9. More elementary school foreign language programs.
___10. Other _____
_____

___ III. Materials

___ 1. More proficiency-oriented materials for high school.
___ 2. More proficiency-oriented materials for colleges.
___ 3. More proficiency-oriented materials for elementary school.
___ 4. Development of post-proficiency era materials.
___ 5. More materials for special purpose courses.
___ 6. More materials for the less commonly taught languages.
___ 7. More computer FL materials.
___ 8. More video FL materials.
___ 9. Other _____
_____

___ IV. Methods

___ 1. More training in proficiency-oriented language teaching.
___ 2. More training in proficiency-oriented language teaching for secondary teachers.
___ 3. More training in proficiency-oriented language teaching for college/university instructors
___ 4. Further exploration of post-proficiency era teaching approaches.
___ 5. More diversification of teaching styles for diverse learning styles.
___ 6. Other _____

_____

___ V. Requirements and Program Structures

___ 1. More college entrance requirements in foreign languages.
___ 2. More college exit requirements in foreign languages.
___ 3. More high school requirements in foreign languages.
___ 4. More elementary school requirements in foreign languages.
___ 5. More contact hours in college language classes.
___ 6. More and better procedures for placement of students in language classes.
___ 7. More and better implementation of credit by examination procedures in languages.
___ 8. Other _____

_____

___ VI. Testing

___ 1. More use of proficiency-oriented testing in language classes.
___ 2. More training for teachers in preparation of proficiency-oriented classroom tests.
___ 3. More proficiency-oriented standardized tests.
___ 4. Inclusion of speaking and writing on standardized language tests.
___ 5. More use of results on proficiency tests for progression in language courses.
___ 6. New language achievement tests.
___ 7. New language placement tests.
___ 8. New language tests for credit by examination.
___ 9. More regular use of speaking tests in language classrooms.
___10. Other _____

_____

___ VII. Articulation and Integration

___ 1. Integrating the arts with language study.
___ 2. Integrating global education with language study.
___ 3. Infusing more target culture into language study.
___ 4. More formal opportunities for public/private school language educators and college language educators to interact regarding curricular articulation.
___ 5. A multi-year public school foreign language sequence.
___ 6. Other _____

_____

___ VIII. Research

___ 1. Research on stages of second language acquisition.
___ 2. Research on most effective approaches to second language acquisition.
___ 3. Research on effective measures of second language acquisition.
___ 4. Research on optimum age for second language acquisition.
___ 5. Research on aptitude for second language acquisition.
___ 6. Studies of effective programs.
___ 7. Studies of effective materials.
___ 8. Other _____
_____

___ IX. Teacher Preparation and Certification

___ 1. Greater language proficiency.
___ 2. Greater methodological expertise.
___ 3. Actual target culture experiences.
___ 4. More language and culture studies.
___ 5. More literary studies.
___ 6. More stringent certification requirements.
___ 7. Other _____
_____

___ X. Foreign Travel/Study

___ 1. More programs for teachers.
___ 2. More programs for secondary students.
___ 3. More programs for college students.
___ 4. More required foreign experiences for students.
___ 5. More required foreign experiences for teachers.
___ 6. More financial assistance for foreign experiences for students.
___ 7. More financial assistance for foreign experiences for teachers.
___ 8. Other _____
_____

___ XI. Professional Organizations

___ 1. More of them_____
___ 2. Fewer of them_____
___ 3. Change of mission: more _____
less _____
___ 4. More/continued emphasis on methods.
___ 5. More/continued emphasis on materials.
___ 6. More/continued emphasis on target language development.
___ 7. More/continued emphasis on opportunities for foreign experiences.
___ 8. Other _____
_____

___ XII. Career Applications

___ 1. More awareness programs for students.

___ 2. More awareness programs for teachers.

___ 3. More communication between language organizations and businesses, agencies, etc., regarding on-the-job needs and current levels of employee language proficiency.

___ 4. More language internships.

___ 5. Other _____

_____

___ XIII. Information about the person answer ing the questionnaire

Primary Language taught: Spanish ___ French _____ German _____
Italian _____ Russian _____ Hebrew _____ Japanese _____
Latin _____ Other _____

Level taught: Elementary School _____ Middle School _____ High School ____ College Language ____ College Literature ____
College Methods _____

State _____ Years experience _____